

The Lazy Days of Summer: When Your Child Seems to Lack Motivation Parenting Strategies – July 2010

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If you are the parent of a teen or young adult, you probably have experienced your child lacking in motivation. You know the times – when great opportunities don't make it into your child's field of vision despite your prompting, prodding, and persistence.

I recall one summer when my stepson had the opportunity to get an internship in our city, in an office dedicated to the work that was of interest to him, through an offer by a neighbor. Despite all of our nudging, which undoubtedly was perceived as nagging, my stepson didn't act on that opportunity – in essence, he refused the silver platter.

We marveled at how this could be and our concern emerged about what kind of summer he was going to have. Or maybe the question was really about what kind of summer we were going to have. He certainly seemed to lack motivation, and the idea of him just hanging out at the house and connecting with his buddies was a disconcerting prospect.

Fast forward a few weeks and my stepson got a job, on his own, working at a local restaurant doing basically whatever was asked of him. He seemed to like it well enough, but it was not until he had the opportunity to plan a road trip to a 3-day summer music festival that we got to see a highly motivated individual. He was printing maps, finding out which of his friends could go, figuring out who could be counted on to drive and for how long each person might get behind the wheel, shopping for food, packing coolers, organizing tents, "making tunes for the road", identifying a motel or two along the way, and trying to get coverage for his shifts at the restaurant. He was directing this small caravan as if his life depended

on it and applying an array of skills throughout it all – only periodically asking us for input. The undertaking was truly impressive and observing him reminded me that it is rare that someone totally lacks motivation, though it certainly feels that way when our children don't act on the things that we suggest or encourage. I became curious about what factors get in the way of someone being motivated. **An individual who seems to lack motivation may:**

- have a genuine lack of interest for what is being proposed;
- have different priorities;
- feel anxious about failing or letting people down;
- have concerns about being accountable;
- fear the unknown;
- not feel like he or she is going to fit in;
- lack the ability to see the potential or value in something;
- not have a sense of what skills or perspectives he or she might offer;
- feel there are more important things to do;
- feel nervous about the “what ifs?”.

Consider keeping these factors in mind as you interact with your child around various opportunities and explore which of these might actually be impeding your child's sense of motivation. You can then adjust your parenting to support your child in the areas in which he or she might lack confidence or understanding, and frame opportunities by highlighting the benefit or value they might have, as this is often a difficult perspective for our children to integrate.

Despite not taking the “silver platter” that one summer, my stepson did fine in college, majored in what he wanted, ended up working and

interning throughout his college experience, and made good connections.

Consider these tips and strategies as you parent your child through bouts of lack of motivation:

1. Look for when your child seems or has seemed most motivated – what factors were operating at those times?
2. Explore with your child what really matters to him or her;
3. Share your expectations clearly;
4. Connect a very practical application to what you are asking of your child;
5. Relate opportunities and options to your child's interests;
6. Guide your child's confidence by sharing examples of how you see him or her as competent
7. Explore extrinsic rewards in small measures -- but don't rely on them, as intrinsic motivation is desired;
8. Put yourself in your child's shoes and try to feel what he or she might be feeling;
9. Avoid controlling language;
10. Invite your child to include a friend (perhaps one you know might be naturally more motivated);
11. Don't assume that something that is obvious to you is obvious to your child;
12. Perhaps offer challenges to stimulate desire;
13. Have your child see you taking risks and entering unknown situations;
14. Realize that lack of motivation is rarely a long term state of being.

Interestingly, I don't think that most of our children feel like they lack motivation, but I do know that this is a label that parents pretty readily ascribe. My question is "why?" What useful purpose does it serve to go down this parenting path? It certainly doesn't serve to stimulate motivation – and if nothing else it usually serves to create tension and further shut down our child's level of engagement. Consider spending far more time uncovering where your child seems to be the most enthusiastic, animated and excited. Engage your child about all that is possible and let him or her know when you see his or her spark or glowing ember. It is when our children have stimulating conversations about their dreams and ideas, and have the chance to articulate them in their own voice, that they can then start to live them.